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ABSTRACT

The major hypothesis of the paper is that as mainstream education broadens its tolerance for individual differences and as mainstream educators gain in the skill and knowledge to individualize instruction, few if any students need to be referred for services delivered outside the general education system. The paper organizes reports from "state of the art" research and practice according to underlying methods and practices which strengthen the mainstream: adaptations of curricula and classroom management systems; teacher development (e.g., inservice training) and administrative management strategies; and early interventions. Recommendations for policy, training and research are proposed, including models to integrate training of regular and special educators. The paper concludes that a creative reformation of schools in general is needed. A 15-page list of references concludes the document. (Author/CL)

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AVOIDING OR LIMITING SPECIAL EDUCATION REFERRALS: CHANGES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The major hypothesis of this paper is that as mainstream education broadens its tolerance for individual differences and as mainstream educators gain in skills and knowledge to individualize instruction, few if any students need to be referred for services delivered outside the general education system. The paper organizes reports from "state of the art" research and practice according to underlying methods and practices which strengthen the mainstream: adaptations of curricula and classroom management systems; teacher development (e.g., inservice training) and administrative management strategies; and early interventions. Recommendations for policy, training and research are proposed.

The purpose of this presentation is to describe the results of a review of the research and practices related to systems for avoiding or limiting referral of students for special education services.[1] It should be noted that referral of a specific student remains the right and responsibility of parents and professionals who seek the most appropriate educational program for adapting the educational environment to meet that student special needs. Systems for limiting or avoiding referrals are not intended to abridge that right or to abrogate that responsibility. Furthermore, we are not focusing on simply reducing the number of students perceived to need special services, nor are we suggesting that there are fewer students who will need specialized instruction. In fact, we are interested in systems that increase the resourcefulness of educators in creating more effective programs to assure the academic and social progress of all students. There is, therefore, an underlying theme of prevention rather than intervention.

The hypothesis is that, as mainstream education broadens its tolerance of individual differences, fewer students will be referred for services delivered outside of the system. In short, referrals can be avoided as general educators improve their instructional delivery system. General educators who develop broader tolerance in educating students with wide range of individual differences can be seen as both the impetus for and the result of strengthening the mainstream.

The boundary issues for this topic, those issues not typically considered to have a special education focus, include teacher development

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[1] For a complete description please refer to Nevin, A. and Thousand, J. Avoiding or limiting special education referrals. In M. Wang, M. Reynolds, and H. Walberg (Eds.)(in press). The handbook of special education: Research and practices. Oxford, England:Pergamon Press.

and systems development research and practices. These boundary issues were reflected in the profiles constructed for a search of the computerized data base for 1974 through 1984 reports and research articles entered in the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), a search of the projects currently funded by Special Education Programs, U.S. Office of Education. Four areas were searched: (a) pre-referral strategies involving teacher development, (b) pre-referral strategies focusing on administration, (c) strengthening the mainstream, and (d) effects of early intervention.

The results are reported in three sections:

(1) Strengthening the Mainstream: Curricular and Ecological Adaptations which includes research and practices related to principles of effective schools; mastery learning, individualized learning and cooperation learning systems; other general education interventions; applied behavior analysis, peer tutoring; and curricular adaptations.

(2) Pre-Referral Interventions: Teacher Development and Administrative Strategies which includes research and practices relating to traditional referral process; changing educators' beliefs and practices; evaluation of in-service and management strategies; case management systems; and consulting teacher systems.

(3) Expanding What is Possible which includes research and practices related to early intervention; independent variables and dependent variables; parental support; and transition generalization models.

The tables on the following page provide a listing of the exemplary literature for each of the above metioned sections.

EXEMPLARS FOR STRENGTHENING THE MAINSTREAM

"General Education Interventions"

Principles of Effective Schools	**Mastery Learning**	**Individualized Learning**	**Cooperative Learning**	**Academic "Time on Task"**
Edmonds, 1979 Brookover & Lezotte, 1979	Block, 1974	Bloom, 1980	Johnson, 1984	Aulderheide, 1981

Applied Behavior Analysis	**Peer Tutoring**	**Adapting Curricula**	**Adapting Learning Environments**
Hall et al, 1968 Haring et al, 1978	Hawkes & Whitcomb, 1980	Haughton, 1970	Wang & Gennari, 1983

EXEMPLARS FOR PRE-REFERRAL INTERVENTIONS

Teacher Development

Changing Beliefs: Thousand, 1985
Changing Actions: Gennari, 1982

Consulting Teacher Systems
Idol-Maestas, Nevin, & Paolucc-Whitcomb, 1986
Lew, Mesch, & Lates, 1982
Knight, et al (Vermont CTP), 1981
Miller & Sabatino, 197
Tombari & Bergen, 1978

Administrative Strategies

Criterion Referenced Referral & Placement
Turnbough, 1979; Tobias, 1982

Case Management Strategies
Garden, Casey, & Bonstrom, 1985
Chalfant, 1979 (Teacher Assistance Teams)

EXEMPLARS FOR EARLY INTERVENTION

Immediate Benefits

White and Casto, 1984

Long Range Benefits

Moore, Fredericks & Baldwin, 1981
Lazar & Darlington, 1982

Parent Involvement

Zeitlin, 1981

Transition to Regular Programs

Thousand, Reid, & Godek, 1984

Summary of the Research and Practices

The research findings that are well substantiated include:

1. There are programs that can be introduced in mainstream school operations that successfully increase tolerance for individual differences and reduce the rates of referral to special education.

2. Administrative and support systems can be implemented that result in increased reliance on the general rather than the special education system to provide intensive, alternative education in the mainstream.

3. In-service training can result in increased skills of regular educators in providing direct intervention in the mainstream for students with handicaps.

4. Principles of effective instruction and effective utility in reducing referral rates of students to special education.

5. Consultation, as a service delivery model, has been demonstrated to benefit students with handicaps.

6. Although the evidence is somewhat equivocal on the effects of parental involvement in school progress, there is some supporting evidence for the effectiveness of models that emphasize involvement of parents in the development of programs for students as a strategy for avoiding special education placement of young learners entering the public school system.

7. The operation of well-structured preschool programs for at-risk students reduces substantially the number of children enrolled in such programs who are later referred to and enrolled in special education programs.

Recommendations

Areas of needed research include: (a) further exploration of early education and other programs that may yield preventative effects; that is, reduce the rate at which handicaps are identified among children; (b) the extent to which parental involvement actually impact on educational programs; the strategies that most directly affect parental involvement; and how, specifically, parental involvement relates to effective service delivery; (c) long term outcomes of pre-referral efforts as effective strategies in enhancing education in the mainstream; and (d) studies involving application of ideas developing within the so-called effectiveness research that offer promise of strengthening mainstream education as a resource for all children.

Training

A critical dimension in closing the gap between the state of the art and the state of practice in further efforts to integrate general and special education is the training of personnel in new practices. Models and techniques for providing such training need to be developed. Recently, the Fishbein Model has emerged as a theoretical and empirically supported research base for conceptualizing changes in educators' beliefs and related changes in their behavior. This model might be helpful in predicting and developing training programs expressly aimed at changing student referrals to and placement in special education programs. Finally, tests of the effectiveness of these new training models need to measure actual changes in educators' expressed attitudes or intentions as well as their behaviors.

Policy

As documented by Weatherly and Lipsky (1977), policies are implemented at the service delivery level only when they match the capacity of the implementors - in essence, educators as implementors (practitioners) themselves actually operationalize the policy. Therefore it will be useful to look directly at the state of the art of practice to create policies to achieve the most comprehensive changes.

Stainback and Stainback (1984) suggested that the special education system should be merged totally with general education into a unified system structured to meet the needs of all students. The basic arguments for a single, unified system reflect an awareness of the disadvantages and inefficiency of operating dual systems and acknowledgement that instructional needs of student fail to warrant separate systems. It is clear that, with appropriate training and support, the general education system can be strengthened to meet the individual needs of students with handicaps. Polices that lead to greater developments in this direction are much needed and can be supported by research findings expressed as state of the art. A number of model projects have demonstrated success in unifying regular and special education -- even for quite severely handicapped students: for example, the School and Community Integration Project (SCIP) (Fox, Schutz, Thousand, & Williams, 1984) and the Homecoming Project (Thousand, Reid & Godek, 1984). In both of these projects, severely handicapped learners formerly placed in regionalized segregated special education classes were successfully returned to their local neighborhood schools. "Homecoming teams" (comprised of the local regular class teacher receiving the student, the student's parents, the local special educators

and administrators, and the special education consultant) accepted the responsibility for the planning and implementation of social and academic programs. Successful integration occurred where local schools assumed "ownership" for the student's program. That is, local school staff believed that the student should be educated in their school, that they were competent to educate that student locally, and that they received the support from administrators, special educators, and parents. Moreover, achievement as measured by the proportion of Individualized Educational Program objectives achieved annually by severely handicapped students placed in integrated settings was correlated significantly with degree of interaction with nonhandicapped students. Basically, these projects show that local school districts can create effective criteria and reinforcement for greater tolerance of individual differences. The administrators in participating districts no longer reinforce teachers for referring students out of regular education but, instead, solicit the mutual collaboration of parents and specialists in creating viable systems for "sticking with" students who have severe difficulties in learning.

Conclusion

The reduction of referrals of students for special education is a complex problem. The history of special education shows a continuing separatist refrain, with a host of philosophical, legal, political, and financial themes. It is not and will not be easy to reverse that tradition. On the other hand, the arguments and necessity for change seem compelling. Lessons still may be learned from Dunn (1968), who pointed out that much special education for mildly retarded students was <u>not</u> justifiable. The literature (i.e., research base) still does not say that separate placement leads to great advantages for students with special education needs, nor does it suggest that integration, without interventions within the general education system will work any better. What is required is creative reformation of schools in general. Such reformation will involve new relationships between special and general education, with much emphasis on training and role change of school personnel (Lilly, 1971, Reynolds, 1965); on use of special education resources as developmental capital (Deno, 1972); and with a great deal of responsible experimental education (Burrello, Tracy & Schultz, 1973). We are encouraged by the zeitgeist that lead us -- even forces us -- to work toward the re-unification of general and special education. A substantial and growing research base is available to undergird that process.

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